

Transparency and openness in government are fundamental to our democratic system. Only if the public is aware of the actions taken by elected and appointed government officials can they evaluate their performance and cast informed votes in the ballot box.

But the issue of openness in government is critical in other ways as well. Every day, important decisions made on the federal level have a direct impact on our local communities. The No Child Left Behind Act, for example, mandates how our schools teach our children, and the funding levels set in Washington for the COPS program affects the resources available for our local law enforcement to do their job.

In the post-9/11 world, this is especially true for the workings of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the umbrella agency tasked with coordinating all of America's national security initiatives. Unfortunately, openness and transparency has been less of a priority for DHS than it should be.

Such a lack of communication between DHS and the average citizen has plagued the proposed Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative - the Agency's plan to impose cumbersome documentation requirements for travel to and from Canada. The goal of WHTI is a laudable one: securing our borders from those who would do our country harm. But a failure to explain when WHTI would go into effect and what its new requirements would be (such as mandating that every person crossing into Canada have an expensive passport) has already resulted in a measurable drop in cross-border travel - nearly a year before the plan has been implemented. What's more, that same communications breakdown has deprived citizens in both the United States and Canada of the vital information they need to pass judgment on the plan. Confusion, not confidence, has so far been the major result of WHTI.

DHS's current vision for WHTI in and of itself is rife with problems that must be addressed. Legislation I have introduced in the House, the Protecting American Commerce and Travel Act, or PACT Act, was drafted with input from key members of the business and local community, and will fix those problems now, before WHTI goes into effect. The bill has also been endorsed by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. But the PACT Act will also go a long way toward making the details of WHTI accessible to the citizens it impacts. The Act requires both DHS and the State Department to develop and implement a WHTI public promotion campaign that will clearly explain any new border policies put in place. By the time WHTI is the law of the land, there should not be any doubt in peoples' minds about either the protection our border offers or what documentation they have to present when they get there.

The citizens of democratic societies should demand openness and transparency from their government. This is especially true on issues as important as national security. DHS must do a better job of explaining its proposals and encouraging public feedback prior to the implementation of new federal policies. The simple truth is that if an idea is worth acting on, then it will survive public scrutiny. That principal is as important to our security as it is to our democratic system of government.